

Influence of online sensory branding experiences on brand loyalty in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

E-commerce is becoming one of the most popular forms of online activity. However, as online shopping increases, consumer commitment to brands decreases. To remedy this, brands are creating memorable brand experiences, of which specifically sensory experiences have been highlighted within the skincare brand of industry. There is a dearth of sensory branding being implemented online, which can be viewed as a forgone opportunity in a marketing context. The study aimed to investigate the sensory experiences desired by customers in South Africa when purchasing skincare products online, and the effects thereof on brand loyalty. This study made use of a positivistic research paradigm and a descriptive research design. The sampling procedure utilised in this study was non-probability sampling and the technique used was convenience sampling. The sample comprised of 321 consumers who had purchased skincare online at the time of the study and a web-based self-administered questionnaire, distributed via a link on Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn, as well as by distributing the questionnaire via email to an existing mailing list, was used to collect the data. Once the data was collected, both descriptive and inferential statistics were utilised to analyse and interpret the data. The results of the study indicate that South African consumers are seeking sensory experiences online, and that digital visual, tactile and olfactory stimuli are especially sought after. It is therefore recommendable that skincare brands make use of strategies such as GIFs, "unboxing" videos, affordable sample packs and instalment payments.

Keywords: Sensory branding; multi-sensory experiences; brand loyalty; digital sensory branding; skincare branch of industry

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Informed consent was obtained from all individual adult participants included in the study.



INTRODUCTION

The skincare industry is the second largest segment of the beauty industry (Howarth 2023; Kolmar 2023; Petruzzi 2023) and is characterised as being highly saturated and competitive (Howarth 2023; Mordor Intelligence 2021; Peterson 2023), resulting in consumers having higher expectations of their personal care products (Cosmetics Business 2020; Rawat 2020). Bowling (2020) adds that there is a correlation between age and spending, whereby older consumers are more likely to spend more on skincare. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic higher lockdown levels were enforced globally (Onyeaka, Anumudu, Al-Sharify, Egele-Godswill & Mbaegbu 2021:1), restrictions were placed on shopping in-stores (Heiberg & Winning 2020; OECD 2020), which led to an increase in e-commerce (Bouzenita & Boulanouar 2016:60; Ecommerce News 2021; Fallatah & Syed 2017:19; Gerstell et al. 2020:2; Hoeschele 2016:1; Kashuba 2021; McLeod 2020; Nyrop, Nathan, Lindquist & Karlsen 2020, 1).

Djordjevic (2021) states that consumers are opting for online shopping over in-store shopping, with a rise from 1.66 billion global digital buyers in 2016 to over 2.14 billion global digital buyers in 2021 (Coppola 2020). Moreover, e-commerce sales are projected to reach 5.4 trillion US dollars in 2022 (Sabanoglu 2021). The popularity and growth of the online shopping industry has been attributed to its association with affordability and convenience (Arora & Aggarwal 2017:92; Djordjevic 2021) and has increased as a result of the global COVID-19 pandemic (Bouzenita & Boulanouar 2016:60; Ecommerce News 2021; Fallatah & Syed 2017:19; Gerstell et al. 2020:2; Hoeschele 2016:1; Kashuba 2021; McLeod 2020; Nyrop et al. 2020:1).

The benefits that businesses can reap from e-commerce, are numerous such as a larger target audience, decreased costs, the elimination of supply issues, the improvement of supply chain strategies and an opportunity to enhance their competitive advantage through ease of information sharing (Hanson, Hitt, Ireland & Hoskisson 2016:11; Kinda 2019:3; Kumar & Nagendra 2018:14). However, Li et al. (2018:3023) argue that this can also pose a challenge to businesses as consumers experience information overload. The use of e-commerce has increased the number of consumers reached by businesses vastly and while this can lead to positive outcomes, it also amplifies the possibility for negative feedback, such as negative ratings or comments (Hulten 2020:9). Morris (2020) along with Robertson (2020) adds that as online shopping increases, consumer commitment to brands decreases.

The decrease in brand loyalty can be attributed to the fact that there are more avenues for error to occur when shopping online (Robertson 2020), due to consumers having less disposable income, intensified by the economic crisis brought on by COVID-19 (Al-Adwan 2020:280; Charm et al. 2020; Morris 2020), convenience (Charm et al. 2020; Morris 2020) and an increase in competition both online and offline (Bhaskar & Kumar 2015:489). In an attempt to address this, brands are relying on how their products make the consumer feel (Alirezaeslambolchi & Erfanalhoseynihamedani 2017:45; Beig & Nika 2019:1; Liegeois & Rivera 2011:15), which can be achieved through the creation of memorable brand experiences.

Gao & Lan (2020:2), Hulten (2017:1) and Kim & Chao (2019:10) recognise that there is a direct relationship between brand experience and the longevity of a brand. Therefore, it is key for marketers to gain insight into how their brand is experienced by consumers and what tools can be utilised to build customer relationships. The importance of recognising customer experience as an important factor has roots in the work of Holbrook and Hirschman (1982:1), as well as Hirschman and Holbrook (1982:1), and the notion has grown in popularity ever since. As stipulated by Gao and Lan (2020:2) and Hulten (2017:1), a vehicle for creating memorable brand experiences is the utilisation of multi-sensory experiences, which will be discussed in more detail later in this article.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study aimed to investigate consumer desired sensory branding strategies when shopping online for skincare products in South Africa. Despite the global shift towards technology, only a few studies have been conducted on digital sensory branding strategies (Abdullah et al. 2018; Petit, Velasco & Spence 2018). Moreover, there is a limited amount of research on the sensory branding of skincare products (Almomani 2020; Grandin et al. 2020; Huang & Lu 2020; Levrini & Jeffman dos Santos 2021; Sakhawat 2019). Therefore, the study contributes to academic research by conducting an investigation into digital sensory branding strategies and then contextualising the literature findings for

skincare businesses. Finally, a conceptual model was created from the literature review to demonstrate the desirable sensory branding strategies for skincare products sold online. The theories and models utilised to contextualise the conceptual model of this study are discussed in the following sections.

THE EXPERIENCE ECONOMY

The experience economy was introduced by Pine & Gilmore (1999:12) and encompasses the use of consumer-centric experiences to create value and in marketing a product, service or brand (Carù & Cova 2016:272; Ferreira & Sousa 2020:572; Homburg, Jozić & Kuehnl 2017:378; Suardi 2019:15), thereby making the product or brand memorable to the consumer (Pine & Gilmore 1999:12; Same & Larimo 2012:482). Pine & Gilmore (1999:14) went further by creating the experience model to depict that an experience can only be successful if both parties, the brand and the consumer, are involved. It is posited that a memorable brand depends on consumer involvement or participation as well as the ability of the brand to either create an entertaining, educational, esthetic or escapist experience (Pine & Gilmore 1999:102; Same & Larimo 2012:483).

Brand experiences are the result of a number of consumer-centric experiences (Hollebeek & Macky 2019:163; Hollebeek et al. 2019; Islam, Hollebeek, Rahman, Khan & Rasool 2019:7; Lemon & Verhoef 2016:70; Rather 2019:19) and are intentionally created by a business to attract attention and interact with customers in an attempt to position themselves in the minds of consumers. The Strategic Experience Framework was created by Schmitt (1999) who categorised experiences into five dimensions, namely feel-related experiences, cognitive experiences, act experiences, relate experiences and sensory experiences. While there are many avenues of brand experience (Schmitt 1999), within the skincare branch of industry, sensory experiences have been highlighted as being of paramount importance, relating to factors such as texture, fragrance and packaging of the products (Cosmetics Business 2020; Moeglin 2015; Singh 2020; Whitehouse 2017).

Sensory marketing model

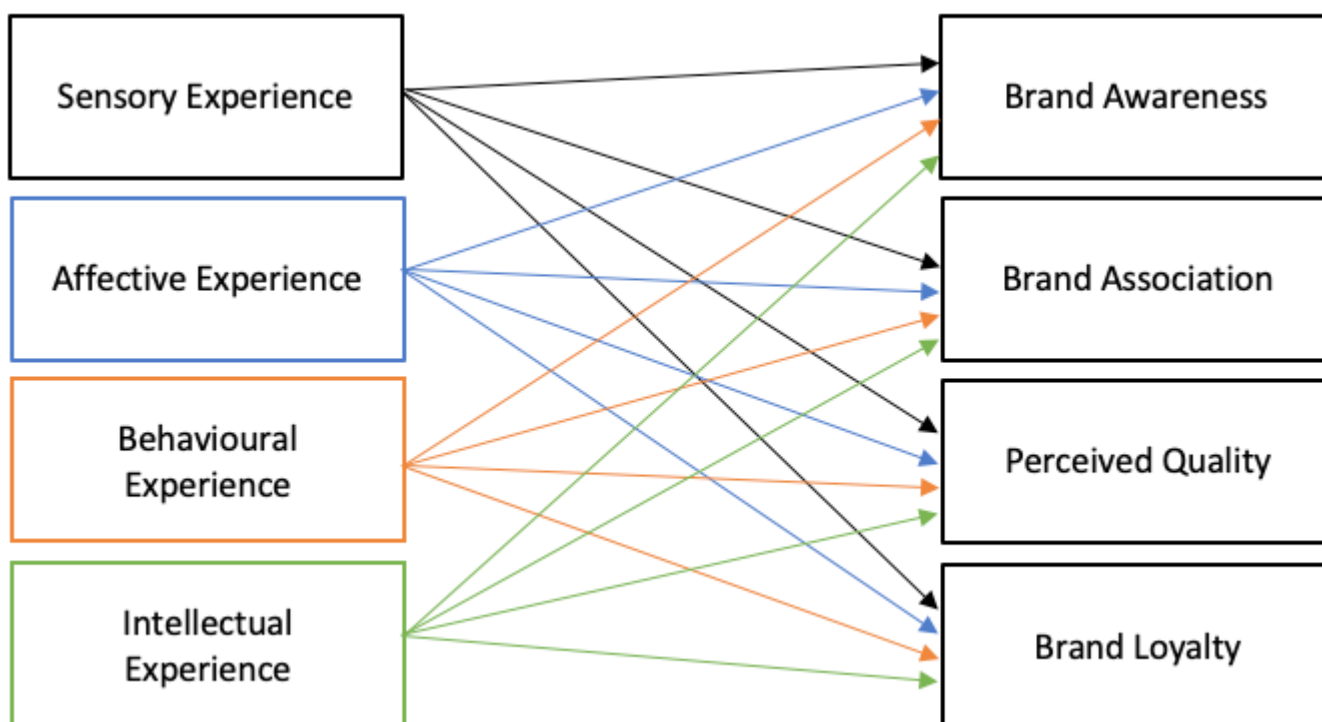
Sensory experiences relate to the use of the five human senses (sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch) to create memorable interactions for the consumer (Beig & Nika 2019:3; Ong et al. 2018:5; Suardi 2019:16) and have been highlighted as one of the strongest dimensions of experience (Gao & Lan 2020:2; Hulten 2017:1). The sensory marketing model signifies that based on the perceptions made by individuals as a result of the sensory stimuli of a product or brand, they will have certain emotional and cognitive reactions, which in turn influence their overall attitudes, learning and behaviour (Hulten 2020:14). However, the most effective use of sensorial marketing is when a number of the human senses are stimulated simultaneously or throughout an experience to achieve a multi-sensory experience. The importance of brand experience can be attributed to its ability to aid in predicting consumer behaviour in terms of brand loyalty (Harris, Kluppel-Strobel & Shakhiry 2017:1; Kim & Chao 2019:10) and in turn, enhancing brand equity (Beig & Nika 2022:157).

BRAND EQUITY

Consumer-based brand equity (CBBE) is defined as the effect of consumers' awareness and knowledge of a brand on their response to marketing of a product offering from a brand (Algharabat, Rana, Alalwan, Baabdullah & Gupta 2021:8; Chatzipanagiotou et al. 2019:328; Koay, Ong, Khoo & Yeoh 2019:55; Narteh 2018:381). From the brand equity model developed by Aaker (1991; 1992), five components of brand equity are identified. However, in a marketing context, only four are relevant, namely brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality and brand loyalty.

A model of the influence of brand experience on brand equity

As reported by Brakus et al. (2009:54) and Ramaseshan & Stein (2014), brand experience is directly related to brand loyalty, which is depicted in Figure 1.



Source: Adapted from Beig & Nika (2022:161)

FIGURE 1
A MODEL OF THE INFLUENCE ON BRAND EXPERIENCE ON BRAND EQUITY

This study focused specifically on sensory experiences as the independent variable, as they are highlighted as one of the predominant dimensions of experience and the importance of which has been emphasised in the online sale of skincare products. Brand loyalty was selected as the dependent variable as it has been noted as the predominant determinant of brand equity.

Brand loyalty

Brand loyalty has become a cause for consideration, attributed to its role in facilitating competitive advantage and financial benefits (Tartaglione, Cavacece, Russo & Granata 2019:1). As defined by Aaker (1991:39), Algharabat et al (2021:9), Beig and Nika (2022:160), Narteh (2018:385) and Tasci (2018:149), brand loyalty is how attached a customer is to a certain brand and Tartaglione et al (2019:1) adds that a successful brand loyalty building strategy should result in repurchase intention (RI), the generation of positive word of mouth (WOM), as well as consumers being willing to pay more (WPM), which is agreed upon by Alexandra and Cerchia (2018:423), Foroudi, Jin, Gupta and Foroudi (2018:10), Giovanis and Anthanasopoulou (2016:2), Haung, Liao, Wang and Lin (2018:2132), as well as Saif, Ahmed, Shareef and Khalid (2018:67).

However, there is a distinct difference in consumer loyalty to a brand based on demographic features such as gender (Burke 2021; Infante, Calixto & Campos 2016:137; Melnyk, Osselaer & Bijmolt 2009:83; Ndubisi 2006:50), age (Gudat 2018; Klopotan, Buntak & Drozdjek 2014:488; Marketing Charts 2018; McDougall 2015) and education level (Klopotan et al 2014:488; McDougall 2015; Sun, Foscht & Eisingerich 2021:2; Vince 2021). Moreover, as observed in the study of Robertson (2020), of late, there is a definite decrease in consumer devotion to brands, which is attributed to an increase in online shopping or e-commerce.

Al-Adwan et al (2020:280), Charm et al (2020), as well as Morris (2020), report that the loss of brand loyalty that is being observed with e-commerce is due to consumers having less disposable income, intensified by the economic crisis brought on by COVID-19. Additionally, convenience (Charm et al 2020; Morris 2020) and an increase

in competition both online and offline (Bhaskar & Kumar 2015:489) have been identified as driving forces behind the decrease in consumer loyalty with reference to e-commerce. Another theory that is posited by Foster (2020) and Morris (2020), is that prior to the internet, consumers relied on the brand itself to inform them of quality of the product offering. However now they have access to other consumers who may have different information (Anastasiei & Dospinescu 2019:1; Herrera, Leon & Vargas-Ortiz 2018:78; Li & Du 2017:338; Li, Yang, Wu, He & Zhao 2018:512). However, a conflicting view is that consumers have altered their brand preference based on necessity, and will therefore transition back when they have the opportunity to do so (Foster 2020; Morris 2020).

SENSORY BRANDING ONLINE

While the skincare branch of industry is expected to remain relatively resilient irrespective of the economic recession (Gerstell et al. 2020:2), Sarathy (2020) cautions that consumers are no less demanding of brands online, and are still expecting engaging sensory experiences that they would receive in-store.

Hulten (2020:9) adds that any time that individuals make use of online or digital platforms to communicate or exchange information, it should be considered a multi-sensory experience. However, there is a lack of sensory branding being implemented online, which can be viewed as a forgone opportunity in a marketing context (Kaushik & Gokhale 2021:5377; Petit et al. 2018:42). While marketers try to implement new interactive and sensory-enabling technologies into the “webmosphere” of the brand (Petit et al. 2018:42), many digital innovations fail due to consumer resistance (Talwar et al. 2020:287), especially from older consumers who are slower to adopt new technology (Vaportzis, Clausen & Gow 2017:2). With specific reference to the sales of skincare products online, visual, auditory, olfactory and tactile stimuli have been found to be relevant and were therefore selected as the sub-variables of this study.

Digital Visual branding

Sight as a sense in retail encompasses how consumers make use of their eyes to experience a product or brand (Cowen-Elstner 2018:23; Hulten 2020:58; Pogorzelski 2018:84). The digital space is placing increased worth on the use of visual stimuli in marketing a brand or product, evident in the use of digital photos, movies, trailers and all other internet advertising (Hulten 2020:59; Petit et al. 2018:44). Digital sensory strategies share some aspects that are used in traditional sensory strategy, such as the colours used by a brand, logo design and packaging design. However, instead of considering ambient features of a store, digital strategies must consider the webmosphere of the digital platform, such as the layout and user friendliness of websites. Additionally, the use of colour as backgrounds on digital market spaces have been proved to influence consumers perception of a site as well as their perceived download speed (Broeder & Snijder 2019:7; Broeder & Wildeman 2020:76; Cowen-Elstner 2018:24; Patel 2021).

The digital world is rapidly advancing, bringing about new means to incorporate online sensory strategy, that enables a richer consumer experience (Griffith 2020). With specific reference to digital online visual strategy, the use of 3D imaging (Algharabat et al. 2017:223), virtual reality environments (VR) (Griffith 2020; Petit et al. 2019:44) and virtual try-ons (VTO), or augmented interactive (AI/AR) technology (Griffith 2020; Huang & Liao 2017:449) are becoming popular. Algharabat et al. (2017:204) explain that as opposed to a static 2-dimensional image, 3D imaging allows consumers to have a 360-degree view as they move their mouse over the product image. Furthermore, Petit et al. (2019:44) opine that VR environments provide consumers with a more interactive and immersive experience. Finally, VTO's is an AI technology, which enables a consumer to either create a look-alike avatar of themselves, or to upload an image of themselves, so that they can better evaluate what a product may look like, solidifying buying decisions (Huang & Liao 2017:450; Petit et al. 2019:48). From the literature on digital visual sensory branding, the following hypothesis was derived.

H1a There is a significant relationship between digital visual sensory strategies and brand loyalty.

Digital Auditory branding

Auditory stimuli in marketing refers to the use of sound to influence consumer behaviour (Bartholme & Melewar 2016:420; Cowen-Elstner 2018:28; Foroudi & Palazzo 2019:136; Galande 2019:48; Hulten 107:6; PH Media 2021; Pogorzelski 2018:86; Shanthi et al. 2019:205). In many cases, the strategies used in brick and mortar stores can be carried through to digital stores. Auditory cues, with reference to marketing, can include the use of brand jingles and the sound or pronunciation of the brand's name (Foroudi & Palazzo 2019:136; Hulten 2020:93; 2017:6; Wala, Czyrka & Fras 2019:112) and Wala et al. (2019:112) states that traditionally, sound has been used by businesses to transfer messages or information about a product or brand in the form of radio or television, but as the internet has advanced so has the use of auditory stimuli. Another means of making use of auditory sensory strategy online, is through video adverts and background music (Hulten 2020:99). From the literature on digital auditory sensory branding, the following hypothesis was derived.

H1b There is a significant relationship between digital auditory sensory strategies and brand loyalty.

Digital Olfactory branding

According to Upadhyaya (2017:353), smell is the most sensitive of the five human senses, the strength of which lies in its ability to create strong feelings of reminiscence (Hulten 2017:7; Pogorzelski 2018:86; Shanthi et al. 2019:206; Vega-Gomez et al. 2020:1). However, as of yet, there is no technology that can replace physical smell via an online platform. Many marketers still try to make use of product specific olfactory strategies on their digital platforms by making use of imagery and descriptive words (Alac 2017:143; Cowen-Elstner 2018:31; Hauser 2017; Hulten 2020:127). By doing this, marketers hope that just seeing the image or hearing about the smell, will enable individuals to make the same associations as if they could physically smell the product.

Another strategy which is being used is the distribution of "scratch-and-sniff" cards, where companies provide a URL or scannable code for consumers to visit, upon which they can scratch the card and actually smell the product while they read about it (Hulten 2020:128). Finally, researchers are continuously working on developing multisensory devices that will enable olfactory stimuli to be delivered to consumers via the internet. From the literature on digital olfactory sensory branding, the following hypothesis was derived.

H1c There is a significant relationship between digital olfactory sensory strategies and brand loyalty.

Digital Tactile branding

To try and simulate the sense of touch, marketers make use of other human senses to stimulate deep rooted associations people have in their memory, such as through the use of high-quality images and descriptive words (Yoganathan, Osburg & Akhtar 2019:388). Another strategy company's make use of online is the option to have the item delivered, and then returned within a certain amount of time should the consumer not be satisfied (Hulten 2020:147; Peck 2020). However, it should still be noted that the likelihood of consumers purchasing products, which require multi-sensory analysis online, is not high, which has led to consumers evaluating brands in brick and mortar stores and then actually purchasing the item online from where it may be cheaper. Skrovan (2017) adds that there is a correlation between age and this phenomenon, whereby older consumers are more likely to first visit an establishment to touch and assess the product before purchasing online.

Consumers interact haptically when shopping online just by touching their mouse or touchscreens (Petit et al. 2019:49). There are numerous technological developments, which have been found to better the haptic interactions individuals have when shopping online (Bregman, Willems & Van Kerrebroeck 2019:272; Chung, Kramer & Wong 2018:796; Van Kerrebroeck, Helena & Bregman 2017:894). However, these technologies are not yet widespread, and a more cost-effective solution would need to be reached before they could become accessible to more companies, such as through the use of vibrations on a smartphone (Olsson 2015:18; Petit et al. 2018:51). While the applications of virtual reality technology are endless, it is a nascent technology (Lin 2022). From the literature on digital tactile sensory branding, the following hypothesis was derived.

H1d There is a significant relationship between digital tactile sensory strategies and brand loyalty.**METHODOLOGY**

A positivistic research paradigm and a descriptive research design, which is associated with a quantitative approach, was used to conduct this study, with a sample population of 321 consumers who had purchased skincare online in South Africa, which equated to a response rate of 86.3%. Respondents were selected via convenience sampling, a category of non-probability sampling, and the data was collected via a web-based self-administered questionnaire, a form of online survey. A link to the questionnaire, accompanied by a detailed cover letter, was posted on social media platforms as well as distributed via a mailing list. The questionnaire of this study constituted six sections, but prior to the main sections of the questionnaire, respondents were also asked to answer screening questions which related to consent as well as whether they had purchased skincare online to ensure they met the requirements of the target audience for this study. Section A of the questionnaire made use of dichotomous or closed-ended questions to gather demographic details of the respondents, such as their age, gender, average monthly budget and frequency of online purchases of skincare. Section B – F collected data relating to the variables of the study. Primary data was collected from respondents via a 5-point Likert scale, where responses of 1 (very positive) and 2 (positive) were grouped and indicative of a positive influence and responses of 4 (negative) and 5 (very negative) were grouped and indicative of a negative influence. A neutral response (3) would indicate that the respondent was indifferent regarding how a certain factor influenced their experience of shopping for skincare products online. The use of 5-point Likert scale questions was appropriate as it allowed the researcher to determine to what extent each factor influenced the experience of shopping for skincare products both in-store and online, rather than just whether they did or did not. From the data collected, mean scores could then be calculated per question.

The primary data collected was organised into an Excel spreadsheet. Prior to subjecting the data to STATISTICA, it was edited and coded to make for appropriate statistical analysis, in terms of both descriptive and inferential statistics. For the purpose of this study, descriptive statistics were utilised to explain the data, constituting frequency distributions, means and associated standard deviations to summarise the sample data. To determine whether statistically significant differences in opinions occurred, ANOVA's and Welch-Robust Tests were used and where significant differences were identified, Tukey Post Hoc Test and Games-Howell Test were calculated to identify specifically where the significant difference occurred ($p < 0.05$ or $p < 0.10$). Through the use of inferential statistics, inferences could be made about the population of the study (Wilson & Joye 2017:78). All primary data of this study were statistically analysed using the latest edition of IBM SPSS Statistics version 28.

To ensure content validity, previously tested items were used to construct the questionnaire. CFA was computed to test the measurement models relating to digital sensory branding. As part of CFA, factor loadings were assessed for each item, and with reference to the model relating to digital sensory branding, only item E11 (the use of interactive software influences my experience of shopping for skincare products online) was removed. Hereafter, the model-fit measures were used to assess the model's overall goodness of fit (CMIN/df, SRMR/GFI, CFI and RMSEA), and, after the necessary modification indices were applied, it was determined that all the model-fit measure values were within their respective common acceptance levels (Hair et al. 2019:636; UCLA 2021; Brown 2015:86). Therefore, it can be deduced that the four-factor model (digital sensory branding) yielded good fit.

Cronbach alpha coefficients calculated for each of the variables constituting digital sensory branding presented values between 0.78 – 0.88, and an average inter-item correlation ranging between 0.42 – 0.57, indicating that there was consistency in the values. Furthermore, all Cronbach alpha values calculated for the variables and sub-variables of the study are above the suggested 0.7 cut-off value proposed by Nunnally (1978), therefore, the measuring instrument was reliable and valid.

Bias in this study was avoided through the use of a relatively large sample size as well as through gathering demographic information on the respondents. Moreover, as the items in the questionnaire were previously tested, they were not leading in anyway and the respondents of this study were anonymous and the researcher therefore, had no way of selecting respondents.

RESULTS: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

From the data collected, 80% of the 321 respondents were female and 53% were over the age 45 years. Furthermore, more than half of the respondents (52%), had an average monthly budget for skincare of R501 – R1000, while another 34% indicated that they had an average monthly budget of R1001 – R1500 for skincare. It was further deduced that older respondents of this study were willing to spend more per month on skincare than younger respondents. Additionally, 45% of the respondents indicated that they purchased skincare products online once every few months and the second most popular answer was that respondents purchased skincare products online once a month (23%).

RESULTS: INFERENCE STATISTICS

For the purpose of this study, a SEM model was utilised to determine whether a relationship existed between digital sensory branding and brand loyalty. It was found that item D9 (the use of virtual reality technology to replicate the olfactory stimuli influences my experience of shopping for skincare products online) and item D10 (the use of third-party technology influences my experience of shopping for skincare products online) had a high MI (68.98) and they were therefore co-varied. Table 1 presents a summary of the regression weights table output.

TABLE 1
A SUMMARY OF THE REGRESSION WEIGHTS RELATING TO DIGITAL SENSORY BRANDING AND BRAND LOYALTY

Factor	Regression weights summary at start					Regression weights summary at end				
	Est.	S.E.	C.R.	P	Std. Est.	Est.	S.E.	C.R.	P	Std. Est.
Brand loyalty <--- Digital sensory branding	0.25	0.07	3.64	<0.01	0.34	0.26	0.07	3.66	<0.01	0.34

From Table 1, it can be seen that there was a significant ($p < 0.05$) relationship between digital sensory branding and brand loyalty, with $p < 0.01$. However, the relationship was relatively weak, as determined by the standardised regression weight estimate of 0.34 respectively. Model-fit measures were used to assess the model's overall goodness of fit (CMIN/df, SRMR/GFI, CFI and RMSEA), presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2
MODEL FIT SUMMARY FOR DIGITAL SENSORY BRANDING

Factor	Model fit summary at start				Model fit summary at end			
	CMIN	SRMR	CFI	RMSEA	CMIN	SRMR	CFI	RMSEA
Digital sensory branding	3.78	0.11	0.82	0.93	3.58	0.11	0.83	0.09

It can be seen that the CMIN and RMSEA values, both at the start and at the end, are within their common acceptance levels for adequate model fit. However, the SRMR and CFI values, both at the start and at the end, are outside of their common acceptance levels. Therefore, it can be deduced that the model yielded a marginal to poor fit. Figure 2 provides the graphical representation of the SEM model for digital sensory branding and brand loyalty, where the following abbreviations are utilised; digital sensory strategies (digital); digital tactile stimuli (DTS); digital visual stimuli (DVS); digital olfactory stimuli (DOS), and; digital auditory stimuli (DAS).

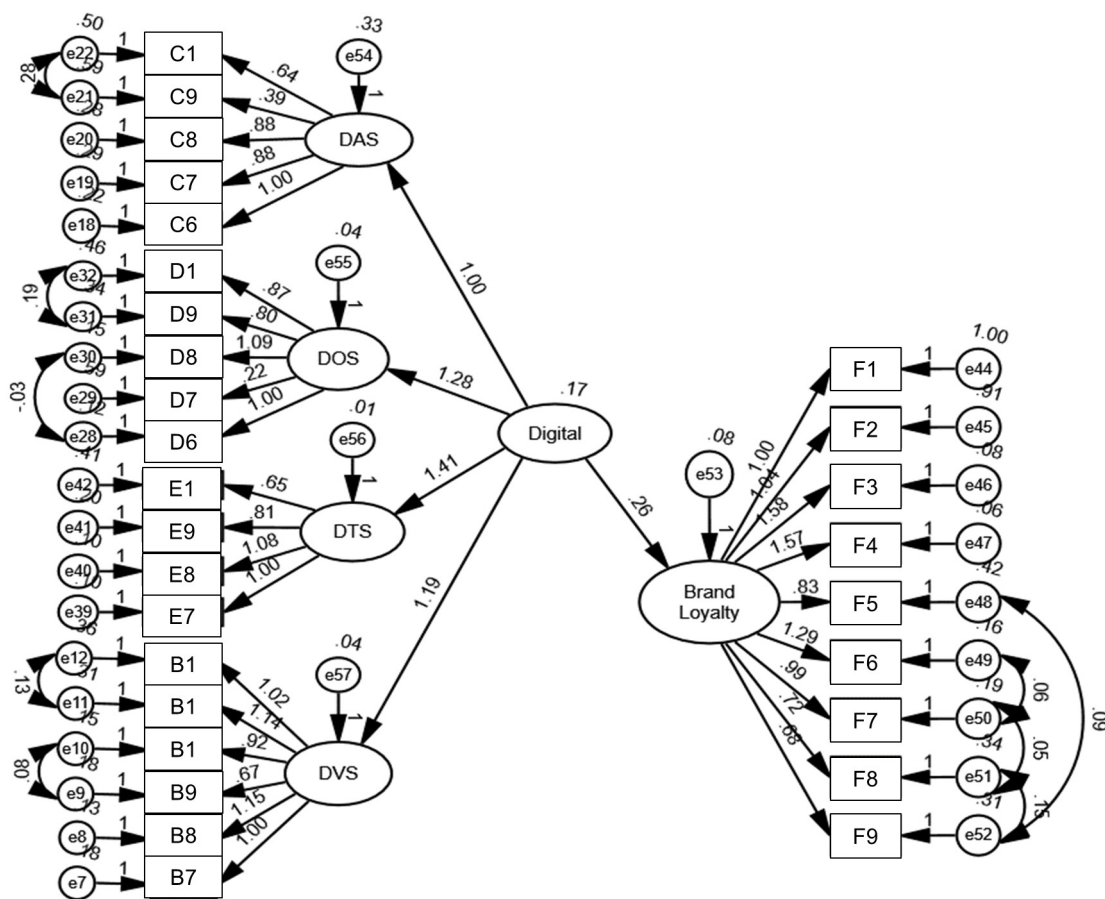


FIGURE 2
THE SEM MODEL FOR DIGITAL SENSORY BRANDING

Furthermore, to determine whether or not any relationships existed between the sub-variables of this study (digital visual, auditory, olfactory and tactile stimuli), and brand loyalty, a Primary Model was conducted, the results of which are presented in Table 3.

TABLE 3
A SUMMARY OF THE REGRESSION WEIGHTS RELATING TO THE FULL DIRECT MODEL

Factor	Regression weights summary				
	Est.	S.E.	C.R.	P	Std. Est.
Brand loyalty <--- Digital visual stimuli	-0.07	0.04	-1.82	0.07	-0.11
Brand loyalty <--- Digital auditory stimuli	0.00	0.03	-0.01	0.99	0.00
Brand loyalty <--- Digital olfactory branding	-0.10	0.06	-1.77	0.08	-0.11
Brand loyalty <--- Digital tactile branding	0.13	0.04	3.32	<0.01	0.24

From Table 3 it can be seen that of all the digital sub-variables, only digital ($p < 0.01$) tactile stimuli had a significant ($p < 0.05$) relationship with brand loyalty. It can further be seen that significant ($p < 0.10$) relationships exist between digital visual stimuli ($p < 0.07$) and digital olfactory stimuli ($p < 0.08$) and brand loyalty.

DISCUSSION

The literature relating to digital sensory branding indicates that consumers are no less demanding of a brand online than they are in-store with regard to sensory stimuli (Sarathy 2020) and sensory marketing is essential in implementing experiential marketing (Foroudi & Palazzo 2019:132; Galande 2019:47) and therefore, brand loyalty.

This could explain the significant relationship between digital sensory branding and brand loyalty ($p < 0.01$) observed in the SEM model conducted. Therefore, it can be concluded that hypotheses H1 (there is a significant relationship between digital sensory branding and brand loyalty) was supported through the results of this study.

With regard to digital tactile stimuli, it was deduced that respondents of this study were divided regarding how interactive software influenced their experience of shopping for skincare online, with 47% of respondents agreeing and 13% disagreeing that interactive technology had an influence on their experience, and 39% being indifferent. This was attributed to the fact that it is relatively new technology and therefore some may have not yet been exposed to it, which was similarly opined by Lin (2022), Olsson (2015:18) as well as Petit et al. (2018:51). It was also determined by the results of this study that respondents felt that high quality images and descriptive language had a positive influence on their experience of shopping online for skincare, supported by a mode and median value of 1 (very positive) for both factors, which was also postulated by Yoganathan et al. (2019:388). From the review of the literature, it was highlighted that an effective strategy that businesses use to overcome the challenge of a lack of touch, is the option to have the item delivered, and then returned within a certain amount of time should the consumer not be satisfied (Hulten 2020:147; Peck 2020). This strategy was also identified by the majority (92%) of respondents in this study as having a positive influence on their experience. From the Primary Model conducted, it was determined that digital tactile stimuli was the only sub-variable that had a significant ($p < 0.05$) relationship with brand loyalty, with $p < 0.01$. The possible reasoning for this may be attributed to the fact that touch is one of the principal sources of stimuli and is linked to ownership and valuation of a product (Cowen-Elstner 2018:25; Hulten 2017:8; Peck 2020; Perry 2017; Suarez & Gumiel 2014:269). It can therefore be deduced that consumers are seeking tactile stimuli even when shopping online, solidifying the literature that posits that the lack of tactile stimuli online is a challenge for brands with physical touch-related products (Hulten 2020:137; Yoganathan et al. 2019:388). It can be concluded that hypotheses H1d (there is a significant relationship between digital tactile sensory strategies and brand loyalty) was supported through the results of this study.

With regard to digital visual stimuli, it was deduced from the results of this study that visual stimuli is imperative to the sales of skincare products online, which supports the ideology that the digital space is placing increased worth on the use of visual stimuli (Hulten 2020:59; Petit et al. 2018:44). Furthermore, from the results of this study it was concluded that the webmosphere created is an important consideration, which was also found by Petit et al. (2018:42). The final conclusion drawn from the results relating to digital visual stimuli is that due to the relative newness of interactive technology, consumers may have differing views regarding how this factor influences their experience of shopping for skincare products online, which may address the claim by Talwar et al (2020:287) that consumers often show resistance to digital innovations.

With regard to digital olfactory stimuli, it was deduced that respondents of this study were divided regarding how scratch-and-sniff cards influenced their experience of shopping for skincare products online, with 59% of respondents agreeing that scratch-and-sniff cards had an influence on their experience and 36% indicating that they were indifferent regarding how this factor influenced their experience. This was attributed to the fact that some consumers may not have been exposed to this marketing tactic as it is relatively new (Hulten 2020:128), and would therefore, be indifferent towards it. It was further determined in the literature review that marketers make use of imagery and descriptive words to lead consumers to make associations regarding scent (Alac 2017:143; Cowen-Elstner 2018:31; Hauser 2017; Hulten 2020:127). This was affirmed by the result of this study, whereby the majority of respondents indicated that descriptive language (93%) and imagery association (87%) had a positive influence on their experience. Additionally, Ranasinghe et al. (2018) along with Petit et al (2019, 53), explain that new technology is being created to deliver olfactory stimuli via the internet and the majority of respondents in this study indicated that they felt that virtual reality technology (80%) and third-party technology devices (74%) had a positive influence on their experience.

It was further deduced that significant ($p < 0.10$) relationships exist between digital visual stimuli ($p < 0.07$) and digital olfactory stimuli ($p < 0.08$) and brand loyalty. Visual stimuli is the most common sensory stimuli made use of online (Griffith 2020; Petit et al. 2018:42; Sarathy 2020), which may explain why this had some direct relationship with brand loyalty. Furthermore, this study makes specific reference to the skincare branch of industry, where fragrance is a key factor in the decision on which product to purchase made by consumers (Singh 2020), which could explain

why digital olfactory stimuli was highlighted in relation to brand loyalty. It can therefore be concluded that hypotheses H1a (there is a significant relationship between digital visual sensory strategies and brand loyalty) and H1c (there is a significant relationship between digital olfactory sensory strategies and brand loyalty) were supported through the results of this study.

Biswas (2016:219), Cowen-Elstner (2018:230), Foroudi & Palazzo (2019:136), Griffith (2020), Hulten (2020:93; 2017:6), Upadhyaya (2017:357) along with Wala et al. (2019:112), who posit that jingles used by a brand are a useful auditory branding strategy. However, with regard to digital auditory stimuli, the results of this study indicated that the majority of respondents felt that brand jingles either had no influence on their experience (33%) or were indifferent (52%) regarding how this factor influenced their experience online. The contradiction may be linked to the fact that the study of sensory branding online is still relatively new and therefore, specific sensory stimuli may have different outcomes online as opposed to in-store.

Cowen-Elstner (2018:29), Hulten (202:86) as well as Shaed et al. (2015:34) recognise a link between auditory and visual cues, which was also indicated by the results of this study. Moreover, multi-sensory experiences have been proven to be the most effective use of sensory marketing or branding (Helmefalt & Berndt 2018:1081; Hulten 2020:13; Imschloss & Kuehn 2017:931). From this literature finding as well as the results of this study relating to the link between visual and auditory cues, the conclusion was drawn that these two sensory stimuli should be used simultaneously in online marketing to create multi-sensory experiences for consumers.

Additionally, the results of the Primary Model conducted indicate that there was no significant relationship between digital auditory stimuli and brand loyalty. Beig & Nika (2019:3), Ong et al. (2018:5) and Suardi (2019:16) explain that digital auditory stimuli constitute a segment of experience and experiences are known to have a direct relationship with brand loyalty (Harris et al. 2017:1; Kim & Chao 2019:10). Therefore, the relationship between digital auditory stimuli and brand loyalty may be indirectly through brand experience, rather than a direct relationship. It can therefore be concluded that hypotheses H1b (there is a significant relationship between digital auditory sensory strategies and brand loyalty) was rejected through the results of this study.

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It can be concluded that with regard to e-commerce, South African brands need to find ways to still deliver the key sought after sensory stimuli, namely, visual, olfactory and tactile stimuli, in a viable way and that it is appealing to their target audience. While more common means of doing this, such as through the use of descriptive language and high-quality images, should constitute the online sensory branding strategy of a skincare brand, additional strategies should be included.

A recommendation for skincare brands in South Africa would be to use moving images such as GIFs, where the consumer can physically see the product being pumped or poured on to an individual's skin, which will allow the consumer to more easily imagine what the feel of the product is. Moreover, skincare brands in South Africa can make use of brand ambassadors to create "unboxing" videos, whereby the ambassador films a short clip of them receiving their order of a brand's product. From here the brand ambassador would explain the feel of the product packaging, the feel of the actual product, as well as the smell thereof, and provide some information on how they apply the product.

The results of this study indicated that in South Africa, younger consumers can afford to spend less on skincare per month than older consumers. Therefore, skincare brands who target this group of consumers need to find ways to make their products affordable. To accomplish this, it is recommended to offer affordable sample packs online. These packs could be created based on skin type, age or gender, and would include a number of sample size products that would last 1 - 2 weeks and would include instructions on how to use the products. This would enable consumers to physically test the products prior to spending larger amounts, which could boost initial sales and hopefully lead to an increase in consumer loyalty.

An additional recommendation, that relates to the result indicating that South African consumers have less disposable income per month due to the current state of the economy, is that skincare brands could offer lay-buy payment options through the use of PayFlex. PayFlex allows consumers to pay for their order over a number of

months, rather than paying a lump sum. This system does not cost the consumer any extra and does not put the brand in debt as they receive their money upfront.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

As the concept of sensory branding online is still relatively new, there was a lack of reliable literature sources to support the study. Additionally, this study focused on the skincare industry specifically, and due to this, taste stimuli were excluded as there was no relevance. Moreover, the skincare industry in South Africa was considered so results may differ for other countries. Lastly, this study made use solely of web-based self-administered questionnaires to collect data, attributed to not only the nature of the study, but to the fact that it was conducted during the global COVID-19 pandemic.

FUTURE AREAS FOR RESEARCH

It is recommended that future research be conducted in the following areas.

- It is advisable that research be done on digital sensory branding strategies with reference to taste stimuli, as this was not included in this study.
- It may be necessary to conduct separate studies which focus on visual, auditory, olfactory and tactile stimuli with specific reference to e-commerce to gain better insights on desirable strategies. This could extend across various product categories.
- A comparison could be conducted on the sensory strategies desired online between demographic characteristics, such as age, gender or budget.
- An additional study could focus on specific key words that skincare brands should be using when selling products online, that would appeal to their specific target audience (age, gender).

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